Content Warning for:

- Suffocation
- Manipulation
- Infestation/Insects
- Rot
- Fire
- Body horror
- Death
- Internalised Ableism

[Theme music 'Some Spooky Sh*t Is Going On Here' by Theo Goodwin plays.]

INTRO

The Underwood Collection is a derivative, non-canonical, fan-made project derived from The Magnus Archives, an original horror podcast which is created and distributed by Rusty Quill Ltd. The Underwood Collection is not endorsed by Rusty Quill Ltd and is distributed under a Creative Commons, attribution, non-commercial sharealike 4.0 international license. For more information about the original source material, visit www.RustyQuill.com/TheMagnusArchives.

The Underwood Collection, Episode 14: Summer Study

ULYSSES

[knocking] Hey, Morgan? [further knocking] Can I come in?

MORGAN

Just a second. [Paper shuffling] Okay, you're good.

ULYSSES

[door opening] Thanks.

MORGAN

Yeah, of course. What's up?

ULYSSES

Ah— well. I need your help, and I also need you to trust that I'm not losing my mind. [door closes]

MORGAN

O…kay? Ulysses, are you recording this?

ULYSSES

This is part of the “trust that I’m not losing my mind” bit.

MORGAN

[deep sigh, considering] Alright. Lay it on me.

ULYSSES

I don’t think Frank’s disappearance was an accident.

MORGAN

[a calculated pause] Ulysses, I… I know you two were close, but have you thought about how… rational that possibility is? I mean, we— we went to his funeral…

ULYSSES

I know. And I know what this sounds like. But I wouldn’t come to you if there weren’t any new proof.

MORGAN

Right.

ULYSSES

There were notes that the exterminators found in the back of his desk, under a false bottom. He was worried about being replaced, by— by the Stranger, or something, or—

MORGAN

The Stranger?

ULYSSES

…Do you know the name?

MORGAN

The name and the concept. I've read Smirke.

ULYSSES

I just sort of assumed I was the only one who knew, once Frank, uh— well. You know.

MORGAN

[completely deadpan] Surprise.

ULYSSES

[also completely deadpan] Yay us. Welcome to the club.

MORGAN

Alright. Can I *see* the notes?

ULYSSES

Ah, no, I burnt them.

MORGAN

Excuse me?

ULYSSES

I. *Burnt* them.

MORGAN

Ulysses.

ULYSSES

Yes.

MORGAN

You're *really* pushing it on the trust here.

ULYSSES

I recorded them; I just didn't want it lying around. Frank's notes said this place doesn't serve the Stranger, but that doesn't really mean anything—they can coexist without serving anything at all.

MORGAN

Wait, what?

ULYSSES

I've seen it. It's terrible.

MORGAN

This isn't funny.

ULYSSES

No. [slight chuckle] No, it wasn't.

Beat.

MORGAN

Do you want to— I mean, we've got the recorder right here—

ULYSSES

Give a statement?

MORGAN

I guess.

ULYSSES

God. Sure. I mean, this was bound to happen eventually, so— fine.

MORGAN

You really don’t have to if you don’t want.

ULYSSES

Well, I’ve been cagey enough about everything already, and I know I need to say something. Anything. It’s been on my mind, recently. God, I’d love to forget about it. Never kept a diary, but I have heard that feelings like to be… packaged, per se, to feed a fear entity, so I’ll take anything at this point.

MORGAN

You’re stalling.

ULYSSES

[deep inhale] Yep. [deeper exhale] Excellent.

MORGAN

It’s alright. You don’t have to—

ULYSSES

Statement of Ulysses Bamba, regarding their experience living in the Alpha Chi Omega fraternity. Statement taken direct from subject, 27th January, 2017.

Statement begins, yeah?

[sighing] Morgan, here’s the thing. You don’t expect a frat house to try to kill you. Or— you don’t expect a frat house to try and kill you because a bunch of eldritch horrors are letting off some steam, I— I’m pretty sure frat houses kill people all the time, in parties and stuff? I don’t know. Point is, I didn’t.

Attempted homicide from a building, though it was the treatment I would receive, was absolutely not what I was expecting when I stepped off the plane in New York, waiting to be driven down to Brown University in Rhode Island. It was the summer of 2000. I was seventeen, looked like I was going on twelve. Pretentious kid, as you can imagine, participating in a worldwide program for exceptional scholars in my year.

One of the program advisors drove me from JFK to the Alpha Chi Omega house, a three-hour car ride which was among the quietest and awkwardest I've ever known. I mean— *God,* I was *so* nervous. Despite my bravado, I was absolutely terrified that the other students wouldn't like me, or that I'd arrive and my name just… wouldn't be on the list.

After about fifteen minutes of small talk, I spent the rest of the ride imagining my long flight home when the powers that be of sock - sorry, that's S S O C C - Summer Seminar of the Crepuscular Consortium, the name of the program - I spent the rest of the ride imagining my flight home when the folks at SSoCC broke the news that my acceptance letter had been a mistake all along.

The gravel crunched under the car's tires as it pulled into the driveway and puttered to a stop, winding down the music, doors creaking with age and rust as I opened them. I hauled my luggage out of the boot of the car with only a little bit of help and, for the first time, looked proper at the Alpha Chi Omega house. It was to be my home for the next eight weeks.

The place, despite everything about to happen there, was pretty. Really pretty, actually, an old building that had been renovated into a fraternity after a wealthy, childless brother donated his family home to the cause. It stood four stories tall, with wide double doors thrown open in welcome, carved stone steps, and a small balcony at every upstairs window.

I want to say the house was Victorian, but I don't know architecture too well— either way, it was old, and banged up, but still beautiful.

Made me feel safe, at the time. Imagine.

I almost choked on dust when I walked inside, but the program advisor — Sam, their name was — didn't seem to notice in the least as they led me up to my room. I don't have asthma, and I've never been sensitive to air quality or anything, but I could barely breathe when I made it inside, my tongue caked in flat air and dry pieces of debris. Did you know that dust is partially burnt meteor? I think I ate a rock in that walk upstairs.

There wasn't only dust in the air, but dirt. It was caked into the crevices of the stairs and piled up in the corners of rooms. The closer I looked, the more I could see that some of the filthy areas of the wall were sticky with old gum and other substances I couldn't - and desperately didn't want - to identify.

Which would've been fine. If it were just a dirty house I would've been fine. I wasn't expecting luxury - I wasn't expecting grime, either, but it's not like I could do anything about the matter - let's be honest, my standards aren't that high. If this were just a dirty house, I wouldn't be making a statement.

I have no idea what entity controlled that place. I have no idea what sort of hellish microcosm this house was for a world where fears worked together. I have no idea why any of this happened - why us, why there, why then. Still can't parse the meaning of— well, any of it, and it frustrates me. I do know one thing for certain, though. I cannot tell you how I know it, and I don't have anything to support it. It's just a feeling. And it might just be a feeling, but I'm rarely this sure of anything.

That house responded to fear. That house responded to *our* fear, and the longer we lived there, the more skilled it was at plucking out what terrified us and throwing it in our faces.

First to go was Kira. She made the mistake of, in the first week, discussing her family. I never got the details, but her mother was horrifically manipulative — she hadn't even wanted Kira to attend SSoCC in the first place. We promised we'd do everything we could to help, as if we could do anything at all. But we were kids. Promises felt different. Important.

In the very beginning of the second week, Kira's mum called. There was a medical emergency. Her brother needed taking care of, and Kira was requested home. Now, that's not supernatural in the least— except that Kira called us crying the night after she arrived back at her house, saying that her brother was fine and that her mother claimed she'd never called in the

first place. It was wrong in its entirety; Kira had shown me the hospital records as we both sat staring at a single, bulky computer.

Kira wasn't allowed to come back, and by the end of the program, she'd disappeared from all our pictures. Some of them have convenient water smudges where her face should be; in others, my arm fits snugly around thin air as I laugh at a joke long since disappeared. Today, I hardly remember what she looks like.

None of us had quite 'gotten' it yet. We thought it was a coincidence that Kira was lost, myself included. Week two, Ishaan mentioned an offhand fear of rodents — laugh as you must at someone else's phobia, but keep it short — in conversation. The next morning his bedroom window was chewed entirely through, claw marks on the windowsill, and he awoke to a rat scurrying down from his bed, across the floor, and into the hall. By the end of the night, two chipmunks were skittering across the kitchen, running after their own tails.

They never left. We tried to coax them out with food, and treats, and lines of Cheerios, but they never took the bait. They were still there when the program ended, as far as I know.

Ishaan didn't come out of his room for three days.

It was when Valerie confessed her fear of fire and the bloody house burnt down that we started to get concerned. It was when Valerie confessed her fear of fire and her room — and hers alone — went up in flames that we got scared. The local fire department spent three hours putting out the place as we watched flames lick at the windows from the ground below, but when they finally left, the damage done to the house was not by any extent corollary. In fact, there was hardly any damage at all, just the peeling of paint around the perimeter of the burnt area. Like the house was shedding skin.

And on it went. I mentioned that I was an insomniac and spent the next three nights awake until five in the morning. A skier from Colorado recounted the time they'd gotten hypothermia and all the warm water shut off. One girl mentioned that she hadn't seen her father, a soldier, in over a year, and the postcard he sent her was lost in the mail. She only discovered he'd contacted her when her mother called, asking why she hadn't replied. You understand the pattern. Nothing incriminating on its own, but dangerous together.

And the place was disgusting. Mold grew in the showers and - despite our being told time and time again that it had been removed - flowered into dark purple shapes across the bathroom floor. We spent at least an hour every day scrubbing the place down, but never did we manage to remove

the caked dirt from where it clung to the walls. It didn't matter how much we cleaned. There was always a sheen of dust in the air, thick and hot.

One of the rooms was so stuffy that its inhabitants were found passed out on the floor after they didn't come down for dinner. I was the one who went up to find them. Thought they were taking a nap, honestly, it was a dorm room; I'd seen weirder. The two boys ended up in the hospital that night, their lungs filled with dirt, as if they'd been buried alive.

Fruit wouldn't keep. Within a day of arrival, it would be swarmed by tiny flies and other bugs. By evening each piece would be rotted as if it'd been sitting untouched for weeks.

One night — one of the many that I couldn't sleep — I heard rustling from my window, and saw Sam-our-program-assistant in the driveway below. They'd made a fire, and tossed a cardboard box of fruit and trapped fruit flies alike onto the inferno, until the flies died — of smoke inhalation, presumably — and the cardboard crumbled away to reveal burnt, stinking bananas oozing mush onto a flaming log.

Sam squatted down. They picked up a stick from the driveway and poked the banana, gently, watching it squirm. Satisfied, apparently, they reached down with their bare hands and carved out some of the bubbling flesh of the fruit, unbothered by the heat, and brought the slime to their mouth. I couldn't hear anything, but the action was enough to make me

gasp as Sam sucked scalding gravel and banana off their fist, and when Sam removed their hand from their mouth, their fingers were blistering with open sores. I could feel my heartbeat in my ears, I was shaking so badly.

And then Sam looked up. And across. And smiled, their mouth burnt red and raw, skin peeling, teeth crowded with pulp. They smiled. Smiled at me.

So you can see why I didn't turn to them for help. Something told me it would've gone badly.

God, and to think— I haven't even mentioned the ants. Probably because I've blocked most of it out of my memory, but— you know. It's important. And therefore will be recorded.

Our first week, one of the students discovered an ant infestation in the walls. We called the exterminators, who did — whatever exterminators do, and left. No one thought anything of it for a while, because we had so much else to worry about, what with the fire, and the rodents, and the rest of it.

The exterminators came and went and we all assumed it would be fine. I thought it was fine until the morning I woke up and saw my desk covered in swarming, tiny, everywhere ants. I'd had a mug of plain tea the night before, no honey, no sugar, and my roommate swears to this day that her drink was only water. It had been enough to attract the ants, though,

enough to get them crawling up the leg of the desk in messy, possessive battalions, enough to scatter them across the clear glass of the table's surface so that I could see skittering legs travel both above and below.

I didn't scream. It was seven in the morning and I'd fallen asleep after the sun had risen; I barely had the mental capacity to process what was going on in front of me. I don't know *if* I processed it, actually, because I reached my hand towards the mug of ants and clasped it firmly around the handle. The insects lost their collective minds, of course, speeding up like I'd just pressed fast forward, and started crawling up my hand as I walked to the bathroom and turned on the sink. Drowned them all. Washed them down the drain.

I did it twice. First with my mug, of course, then my roommate's cup, the ants swarming around my hand and sliding across my fingernails. I was so focused on getting to the bathroom - a disgusting lair of communal filth - that I didn't even realise when the ants began to burrow. In fact, I didn't notice until much later in the day, after all the ants had been chased out of my room, when I watched something squirm beneath my skin. It itched. I thought I was hallucinating, and it was a busy week, so I just… ignored it.

Bad choice? Uh, yes. I make a lot of them, and I made more when I was younger, shut up.

It wasn't that I didn't *know* anything was wrong, it was that I didn't *want* to. I didn't want to think about how the ants kept crawling out of the walls, despite the exterminators' reassurance. I didn't want to think about the feeling of legs against my skin, the pattering ghosts of an insect's touch.

I went down to the basement one night. It was about three in the morning — my sleep schedule has always been atrocious, and this house worked wonders to make my insomnia worse. A couple of my housemates were playing a drinking game — there was no alcohol; it was strictly forbidden, but the act of playing was the charm — and as I rinsed out my mug and put on the tea water, I noticed the table was writhing.

No— not writhing. Swarming. There were ants in those red solo cups, drawn to my housemates' lips like moths to flame. I stared over the sink in shock and disgust. They were drinking ants. They were *drinking ants,* and they laughed as they did so, and they acted as if nothing was wrong.

One of them — a bright-eyed party girl from Kentucky named Annie — joined me at the sink, holding a cup filled to the brim with wriggling, tumbling ants. She took a sip and extended her hand to me, mirthful and careless, and— God. It was. [stammering] I took a s— I— I took a step back, shook my head. There were ants crawling between her teeth, escaping out the side of her mouth.

And it would've been — well, not fine, very much not fine, but a lot easier to ignore — if she hadn't dropped the goddamn cup. As it happened, she very much did, and I didn't recoil fast enough. Ants went everywhere, coating the ground in a living quilt of iridescent earth. There were carpenter ants, fat and black, ready to pop; garden ants, small and brown, stumbling over each other in their haste for freedom; fire ants, furious and red, defying us as they scattered. Or — should have scattered.

Instead, they came for me.

I don't know why. I was an easy target, maybe. I was there. I was available and already marked. Either way, the ants came for me, surging up my bare feet and burrowing into my toes, into my calves — anywhere they could find purchase in soft flesh.

I blacked out. Well, no, I was awake and still functioning, I just don't remember anything else from that night. I was told I went back to my room, eventually, with a cup of tea, and barely spoke. It sounds like me, but I— I just don't know.

The conditions in the house got progressively worse as the program continued, and the friendships we made were survival. We spent as much time out of there as possible, scouring the town for a place that could rid our noses of the stench of must and dank and sweat and dirt. I don't know how

many entities nestled in the corners of that old building, but I know if the Lonely had gotten its way, we all would have died.

A drastic claim? Yes. Overdramatic? I know I have a flair for it, but almost certainly not.

I went home, eventually— really home, back to England, still itching, still watching lumps of insects wriggle underneath my skin. It kept me up at night, the patterns of bruises that they wove into my shins. I started wearing long trousers, even though it was summer, uncomfortably hot.

I went home, and ants started radiating out of me. First, it was my suitcase — a lone carpenter ant scuttling across the floor, its exoskeleton gleaming like a corrupted blackberry. Then they started falling out of my trousers, crawling out of my bed, one at a time. My legs didn't itch so much as ache, a near-permanent bruise mottling my skin from the knee down.

My family was out blueberry picking when it all came crashing down. I was standing in the bushes with a bucket under the hot sun, and whatever was inside of me decided it had found a new habitat. My legs became anthills, and an entire population rushed out of them, racing across the ground like spilled beads. There'd been so much pressure building up in them that I collapsed, hard, fell to the ground and hit my head. My mother

told me I was found convulsing, surrounded by ants, a marionette with an amateur, uncertain puppetmaster.

An allergic reaction, the doctors said. The marks on my legs were bites, clearly. They could never explain the maze engraved in my bones, the fourteen stress fractures that caused me to use a wheelchair full-time for six months, part-time to present day. I don't blame them, for not knowing. It's not like they could understand.

This is why, by the way. The leg braces, the cane, the chair. All of it. I was made into a labyrinth for parasites, and their relics have left me as glorious as a Roman statue with the nose broken, a marker of society fallen.

I'm still in contact with most of my housemates from that summer. Not Annie, though, she, uh. She died. Too young, she was twenty-five, she uh— there was dust, in her home. It built up, and the things living inside it built up too. The autopsy said asbestos exposure caused the scarring in her lungs, but I saw the images. It's the same set of winding tunnels that almost broke down my shins.

I was just lucky, I suppose. To fight it. To win. To— to survive.

You don't just recover from something like this, and to be completely honest, I haven't, but I'm alive. Goddamnit, I'm alive, and as long as I'm

alive, I’m myself, and as long as I’m alive, I can remember. I’m alive, despite everything, and I plan full well to stay that way.

Statement ends.

MORGAN

Jesus.

ULYSSES

[forceful] Yep. Very sad, etc, etc. It happened, I’m not over it, it doesn’t really matter. There’s nothing else to say in statement follow-up; it happened to me. I’m all the follow up you need. Have at it, Mog, put me in the system.

MORGAN

Ulysses, I—

ULYSSES

[voice almost breaking] It’s fine.

MORGAN

I don’t know what to say, but I’m— I’m sorry.

ULYSSES

[forceful] I said it’s fine.

MORGAN

[putting it together] Wait, the… the infestation in your house—

ULYSSES

Yep. Not fun. Which is the other thing.

MORGAN

The other thing?

ULYSSES

Damage was almost entirely done to my study. I didn’t tell anyone, because at that point it was just— grief, but… I was looking into the plane crash at the time, and… all of those notes were destroyed. Handwritten, only copy. Same type of damage on Frank’s— or what I found, anyway.

MORGAN

[salty] Which you *burned.*

ULYSSES

Yes, which I burned. Keeping them was too much of a risk.

MORGAN

You could have hidden it. Or at least shown me first, so I could've—

ULYSSES

So you could've what? Filed it? Not everything needs as extensive an organisational system as you have, Mog. I recorded what I needed, and remembering it is better than leaving it in writing for anyone to dig up.

MORGAN

[just deciding not to argue at this point] You know what? Sure. You're going to be the death of me, you know that, right?

ULYSSES

Will you help?

MORGAN

Yes. Fine. But if it turns out to be nothing, we drop it. Okay?

ULYSSES

Deal.

MORGAN

I have some of Frank’s old files saved, back from when he was doing your job. I’ll see if I can grab them.

[knocking]

ULYSSES

Come in.

ADRIENE

Ulysses. I thought you might be in here.

ULYSSES

I was just leaving.

ADRIENE

Do you need any help?

ULYSSES

My arms work fine, thanks, I can handle it.

ADRIENE

Of course. I was just heading in the direction of your office regardless; I'm sure we can find something to talk about.

ULYSSES

Morgan, can you pass me the recorder?

MORGAN

Yeah. And I'll get back to you later.

ADRIENE

About?

ULYSSES

I'll tell you on the way. Something to talk about, after all.

[Tape clicks off]

[Theme plays.]

OUTRO

The Underwood Collection is a podcast produced and distributed by the Pitch Library Creative Team. Find us on Twitter @PitchLibrary, on Tumblr at www.pitchlibrary.tumblr.com, or contact us by sending an email to usherfoundation@gmail.com. The Underwood Theme was written by Theodore Goodwin and the Underwood Logo was created by Mae B. Thank you for listening.

[Theme ends.]